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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000107

SIPDIS

NSC FOR FRIED, WILSON, AND HAINES

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO SLOVAKIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Scott N.Thayer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary/Introduction: The Slovaks -- government and public alike -- are euphoric to welcome President Bush February 23-24 as the first sitting U.S. President ever to visit Slovakia. The GOS sees the visit as validation of its ambitious reform program and pro-U.S. policies. The Slovak people, whose national character tends to view Slovakia and Slovaks as underdogs, are flattered (and slightly incredulous) that their capital was chosen as the site for an important meeting between Presidents Bush and Putin.

2. (C) Slovak self-deprecation aside, there is a good story to tell here, one which resonates well with the themes of promoting liberty and transformational diplomacy. Since 1998, Slovakia has gone from being what Madeleine Albright termed "the black hole of Europe" to the "Tatra Tiger." NATO and EU membership were the focal points of the Slovak government and people and the locomotive of reform, and they engaged in a remarkable sprint (with U.S. and other donor support) that reached both those goals in the spring of 2004. That reform experience is now being exported, to Ukraine, to Belarus, to the Balkans, and to Iraq, again in tandem with the U.S. and other donors. However, having reached those goals, the Slovak political leadership has not come to closure over what it wants to accomplish as a NATO and EU member; as a result Slovakia is hesitant to speak up in most NATO and EU meetings.

3. (C) Slovak-American ties date back to the end of the 19th century, when thousands emigrated to the coal mines and steel mills of the industrial Northeast. As a result, many Slovaks have American relatives, albeit distant, and the U.S. is still viewed as the beacon of hope that never dimmed during the Communist era. Slovak views are reflexively transatlantic and receptive to our policy message. The President should encourage the Slovaks to become more-outspoken in both NATO and EU fora, in support of their own and U.S. interests. It would also be a good time to discuss future requirements for operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other NATO priorities, and urge Slovakia to step up its commitments. On the bilateral front, U.S. investment continues to pour into the country, and our influence is felt more and more in economic and business spheres. The President's visit thus affirms the past, and points to the future. End summary/introduction.

Internal Politics

3. (C) Prime Minister Dzurinda heads a coalition government that is far more stable than its precarious parliamentary status would suggest. (Technically, it has lost its majority and relies upon independent deputies to implement its program. Realistically, no one doubts Dzurinda will be able to complete his four year mandate in 2006 and continue his reform agenda.) Nevertheless, other parties are acutely aware that the GOS -- and its policies -- are dominated by a party (Dzurinda's SDKU) which has only 23 seats in the 150 member Parliament. In public and private meetings, it will be important to recognize the contributions that all governing parties and members of parliament have made in implementing Slovakia's reform program.

Foreign Policy

4. (C) Dzurinda is instinctively pro-American, and he has sealed his legacy as the Prime Minister who reintegrated Slovakia into European and transatlantic structures. NATO accession in March 2004 and EU accession in May 2004 were the result of the aggressive foreign policy and internal reform program during Dzurinda's first (1999-2002) and second (2002-2006) terms. In March 2004, Dzurinda hosted the "Bratislava II" conference to encourage other European and Eurasian countries on their paths to modernization.

5. (C) The GOS has been pursuing an extensive defense reform program with the aim of creating a smaller, more deployable

military that meets NATO standards. The Dzurinda government has been steadfast in its military commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans, and maintains peacekeepers in UN PKO's around the world. Slovakia's deployments to OIF, OEF, and KFOR underscore its commitment to the war on terror.

Slovakia is contributing roughly 650 troops to military operations around the world--a number that is high in relation to the population of the country--and is now shifting away from (often reimbursable) UN peacekeeping

operations towards NATO-, EU-, and U.S.-led operations. This is an expensive decision, and both the GOS and Parliament are wary of negative public reaction that any discussion of an increase in force commitments could generate. Hence, although we have been trying to persuade the Slovaks to do more (such as a PRT in Afghanistan or a sizable contribution to NTM-1), we have not been successful at the political level. Coming the day after the February 22 NAC and MNF force generation conference in Bucharest, the President's visit is an opportunity to underscore the need for Slovakia to provide more forces.

16. (C) Slovakia often agrees with U.S. foreign policy objectives, but is rarely an outspoken actor in international institutions. With an upcoming term on the UN Security Council (2006-2007), and full-fledged membership in both NATO and the EU, our challenge is encouraging the Slovaks to play a more active role in formulating policies in these organizations. The GOS sees its niche in policy toward the Balkans and its Eastern neighbors (Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova). It has been and can be very helpful both through formal government channels and through NGO activities helping to build civil society.

Economy and Investment

17. (C) Slovakia has been called an investors' paradise and it is now poised to become a regional economic power, especially in the automotive industry. Reforms have made Slovakia an economic success story and captured the attention of policymakers and businesspeople around the world. Cumulative foreign direct investment has quintupled in the past five years and American companies are the third largest investors. U.S. Steel's Kosice operation is the largest economic force in Slovakia and the well-regarded company won the Department of State's 2003 Award for Corporate Excellence. The U.S. has a disproportionately large and positive presence in economically depressed eastern Slovakia. As the standard of living increases (Bratislava is above the EU average, though the rest of the country lags well behind), there will be a bigger market for U.S. trade as well. Our very strong economic ties will help balance EU influence and provide a sturdy framework for our overall relationship for many years to come.

18. (C) Corruption continues to be a problem throughout Slovakia, and the broad immunity from conflict of interest and financial disclosure laws which MPs and judges enjoy continues to be criticized by watchdog groups. Nevertheless, economic growth and increased western investment have brought with them higher business standards. Parliament passed a law creating a special prosecutor's office and court system for corruption cases, and there have been several highly-publicized arrests of past and current government officials on corruption charges. Both anecdotally and in measures such as the Transparency International index, the overall level of corruption appears to have diminished over the last several years.

Public Opinion

19. (C) Slovak citizens generally view the U.S. favorably; they remember American support for freedom in Central Europe, and many Slovaks have family ties to the U.S. Nonetheless, public opinion does not keep pace with the government on issues like Iraq, where only 21 percent of the population favored the deployment of Slovak troops. However, public opposition has not been strongly voiced, and there were no large-scale anti-Iraq war demonstrations. Support for NATO membership has recovered to 58% after a low two years ago of 35%. Three-fourths of Slovak citizens are critical of the President's treatment of international politics. Compared to other Europeans, fewer Slovaks think their country should take an active part in world affairs.

Visas

10. (C) The visa issue is one of the greatest irritants in terms of public opinion. Slovak citizens strongly believe they should be given visa-free travel to the United States because Slovakia has proven to be such a staunch ally and is now a member of both NATO and the EU. In October 2004 the embassy and the GOS set up a bilateral working group on

consular issues; it will next meet on February 11. We have already adopted many best practices recommendations from CA in order to streamline the visa application process. While

GOS officials recognize they must temper expectations and acknowledge that Slovak behavior (overstays and fraud) contribute to the situation, they continue to press for Slovakia's eventual admission to the Visa Waiver Program.

Roma and Other Minorities

11. (C) Slovakia's transition to a diverse, multicultural society is not complete. The GOS has made efforts to improve the lives of its Roma population living in poverty, but progress has been slow and a comprehensive solution will likely require the EU to take a major role. Anti-Semitism and xenophobia still persist in certain elements of Slovak society, although repudiated by mainstream politicians. The President's inaugural address emphasized that a nation cannot export freedom if it tolerates racism at home, and it is a point that is as relevant in Slovakia as in the U.S.

Extradition

12. (C) In late December 2004 we presented to the GOS the draft text of a new bilateral extradition treaty. Slovakia amended its laws to permit extradition of its nationals to EU member states pursuant to the European Arrest Warrant, and we are asking the GOS to expand that commitment and agree to extradite nationals to the U.S. Several other EU member states have agreed to this. Crime is international; prosecution should not be hindered by outmoded obstacles such as nationality. To date the GOS has not responded whether they would agree to extradite nationals to the U.S. A direct appeal from the President on this point could have tremendous influence on the decision.

Export Controls/Arms Sales

13. (C) Slovakia's past (during previous regimes) as a supplier of arms and other goods to less-desirable regimes means old habits have not completely gone away. GOS export controls are now much stronger, and we are regularly consulted in advance of questionable sales. Still, interest persists in trade with Libya, Belarus, Iran, and other countries of concern. It would be useful to thank the GOS for consulting with us and to reiterate our concerns about putting commerce ahead of security or human rights.
THAYER

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